

Galatians 2:15-21
Proper 6C 2013

At this point in the young movement of followers of Jesus Christ, what do we know? The apostles were sent out to make disciples of Christ. Their first act after receiving the Holy Spirit was to baptize over 3000 people. And then the apostles split up into smaller groups and as individuals to walk through various lands and people to spread the news of Jesus Christ and to bring more people to Christ with their good news of the unconditional love of God – an unconditional love that was no longer bound up in the Hebrew legal code.

So Peter's job was to go to the Jews to preach Jesus, and Paul's job was to go to the Gentiles to preach Jesus.

Peter caved to the pressure of the circumcision faction among Christian Jews and said that anyone who wanted to become a member of the community of followers of Jesus must be first circumcised according to Jewish ritualistic law. He was at some level a people-pleaser and didn't have the strength or the wherewithal to push back.

Paul said anyone who wanted to become a member of the community of followers of Jesus was not constrained by Hebrew law and tradition but rather justified by their faith alone in Jesus Christ.

Peter caved in to the circumcision faction even though he knew it was not what faith in Jesus Christ was about. If he insisted on everyone following that law, what laws would come next to restrict membership in this group of Jewish Christians? Would they really be Christians then? Or would they be another splinter Jewish sect?

So seriously – if you were a Gentile man in the first century, which group would attract you?

Paul stood his ground and said that one received the grace of God through faith alone – not through any kind of works, including the law. Believers must –like Jesus – die to this world and be resurrected in a new life so that Christ might live through them. Their only law was to love God and love one another.

For Paul, the rituals, the law, and all of the trappings of Jewish worship were no longer of any importance. They were transcended by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This would be a new community of God, with as few encumbrances as possible.

Of course, some rituals did develop in Christian communities of the kind Paul began and to which he preached – rituals like having a meal together as Jesus did that one last time with his disciples. And they tried to use the words Jesus used, reminding themselves why he died and rose again, and renewing their own bodies and spirits so they could continue. As we know, however, rituals and different understandings of Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit continued to develop over the centuries – rituals and different understanding that brought complexity, exclusion, and separation to the Christian movement.

We are also aware that pretty much all religions and spiritual groups have their own rituals and traditions – ostensibly to enable groups of people to take on an identity of sorts with a common understanding of their faith and/or spirituality.

It's important, I think, for any group to do some self-reflection and examination on their basic, primary reasons for existing and identifying those things that bring us closer to fulfilling our call as a Christian community and those things that hinder our ability to grow in faith and spirit and to invite others to join us.

Even more essentially, do we want to invite others to join us? What do we have to offer? We certainly know what canoe clubs or social service organizations or museums or political parties or private clubs have to offer. Why, we think we even know what mega-churches have to offer! But what do we at St Clement's have to offer as a Christian community in the Episcopal tradition?

Do we want others to join us? No? Yes? If we don't, then what are we really about? If we do, then are there reasons that we can each articulate for others to join us? If what we have here in this community and in our own faith and spirituals journeys is so wonderful, why wouldn't we want others to experience it as well?

[Dialogue with congregation]

Paul is very clear in his message to the people of the churches in Galatia about what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ and the incredible benefits to them as a result of that identity. This summer and fall we'll begin to discuss intentionally how we Christian Episcopalians invite people to join us in this community and how we can encourage them to allow their faith to result in Spirit-driven works and ministries. I hope we will begin to gain some of the insight and understanding of our own faith and community that Paul was able to articulate so clearly.

Amen.

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